

Background guide
United Nations Human Rights Council
AlexMUN 2023

President: Ana Alfaro Bárcena
Moderator: Victoria Rodríguez Varela
Conference Officer: Daniela Ortega Belsasso

Members of the chair

Esteemed delegates, I, Ana Alfaro, will be acting as your president for the 2023 Alexmun United Nations Human Rights Council. We will be debating the protection of non-established organized religions in the western world and the Human Rights violations in Xinjiang. It is my responsibility as your president to guide you through this process and provide you with aid.

If you have any doubts or are in need of assistance, please don't hesitate to contact me through this email: ana.alfaro@bab.edu.mx.

Greetings delegates, I, Victoria Rodríguez, will be your moderator for the 2023 Alexmun United Nations Human Rights Council about religions in the western world as well as possible Human Rights violations in the Chinese province of Xinjiang. It is in my best interest that you feel guided and prepared to take on your role and responsibilities as a participant so that you can achieve the best possible solution.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at: victoria.rodriguez@bab.edu.mx.

Dear Delegates, I am Daniela Ortega Belsasso. I will be your Conference Officer at the 2023 Alexmun United Nations Human Rights Council. We will be addressing the protection of non-established organized religion in the western world, as well as the possible Human Rights violations in Xinjiang. My goal for this Alexmun is for the debate to be smooth sailing, and for everyone to be comfortable enough to participate.

If you need any help or have any questions, you can contact me via this email: daniela.ortega@bab.edu.mx.

History of the committee

The United Nation Human Rights Council (UNHRC) was founded on March 15th, 2006. This committee is one of the intergovernmental organs of the United Nations, whose main objective is the study of circumstances that lead to the stability of people in the 47 members responsible for the violations of Human Rights. These 47 members are chosen taking into consideration the compliance with an equitable geographical rotation. The members of the council serve for 3 years and there is not such a thing as re-election when they already served for two consecutive terms. Africa has 13 seats, Asia and Pacific states 13 seats, Latin America and Caribbean 8 seats, Western Europe 7 and Eastern Europe 6 seats. Additionally, this system is responsible for the furtherance and protection of human rights in the face of the universal ideals of human dignity.

The headquarters of the UNHRC are in Geneva, Switzerland. The highest position within its structure is held by the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which is currently held by Volker Türk, who oversees all the policies made by the United Nations regarding human rights amongst other things.

As stated in the official website of this organization, the priority items are: "To Strengthen international human rights mechanisms in order to promote equality and the fight against discrimination, the fight against impunity and the strengthening of accountability and the rule of law; the integration of human rights in development plans and in the economic sphere; expanding the reach of democracy; and create mechanisms to alert and protect human rights in situations of conflict, violence and insecurity".

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was created in December 1948, establishing for the first time in humanity the basic economic, social and cultural, civil and political rights that all human beings should enjoy.

The Council has its structure divided in 4 main bodies:

- Division of External Relations (DER)
- Division of Financial and Administrative Management (DFAM)
- Division of Human Resources Management (DHRM)
- Division of Information Systems and Telecommunications (DIST)

Regarding its history, the headquarters is delivered to a division within the headquarters of the organization. The United Nations in 1940. Subsequently, the Member States of this organization that decide to go to the Division of Geneva, will be the Center for Human Rights. The Center has begun to gain importance and obtain institutional support; thus, in 1993, by a General Assembly of the creation of the post of High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The committee is composed of 15 delegations (preliminary)

- Afghanistan
- France
- Germany
- Iran
- India
- Italy
- Jordan
- Pakistan
- People's Republic of China
- Qatar
- Russian Federation
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- United Mexican States
- United States of America

Topic A: Protection of non-established organized religions in the Western World

Religion is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as the personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices. (Merriam Webster dictionary, n.d.). However, not everyone agrees with this definition. Some people exclude beliefs and practices that many people passionately defend as religious. For instance, their definition consists in the belief of a personal deity or a supernatural entity. Which means that this excludes non-theistic religions such as Buddhism and religious Satanism which have no aforesaid belief. Some definitions equate "religion" with "Christianity," and thus define two out of every three humans in the world as non-religious. Many religions differ from this traditional definition, such as some forms of indigenous religions and paganism, which can be considered non-established organized religions. (Mitchell, T, 2020). Indigenous religions are the ancestral beliefs of those who have been natives of a respective land. These organized groups are facing a lot of systemic discrimination and marginalization. Some places restrict their sacred ceremonies and languages, thus invalidating their right to freedom of religion. Furthermore, indigenous communities are facing challenges in order to practice their religion, such as forced assimilation and displacement, often the destruction of sacred sites is imparted. (OHCHR, 2022). On the other hand, paganism is used to designate those religions that do not worship the God of Abraham, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Shintoism.

Historical context

To understand history it is essential to also consider the history of religions. "Religion has been an instrument of liberation and an instrument of coercion. Religious identities have been a matter of choice and a tool of control." (Yale University, n.d.). But most importantly, religious institutions, often ruled by men, have shaped the history of knowledge, art, and technology. Western religions are those which developed within Western culture, and are fundamentally different from Eastern and African religions. These established religions of the Western world include but are not limited to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, there are a handful of non-established organized religions that are either not publicly acknowledged or simply not recognized as legitimate. These consist of indigenous religions

and forms of modern paganism. This repudiation causes obvious distress within those who follow them and sparks the debate on what should be considered legitimate belief systems and what should not. Governments have an enormous responsibility when granting the establishment or non-establishment of religions and recognizing groups of people who have been previously ignored. In that responsibility comes making a clear division between legitimate and illegitimate claims of what should and should not be considered organized religion. Recognising, acknowledging, and supporting the groups of people who follow these is an essential part of this duty carried out by governments throughout the world.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines paganism (from the word pagan) as “a religion that worships many gods, especially a religion that existed before the main world religions.” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). This definition has been used mostly during post-colonialism to describe any religious practice outside of the Abrahamic branches, namely Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. While it is a term that has been loosely used in the past, which carries a complicated, mostly Eurocentric, history, it has been revived and reclaimed over the past decades as neo-paganism, aiming to neutralize the previous meaning and remove the stigma around it.

The most practiced pagan religions of the Western world are Wicca, Heathenry, Druidry, and Shamanism.

- Wicca is the largest, most practiced neo-pagan religion. It formally emerged from England during the 1950's and has grown in popularity ever since. Its main focus is reverence to nature and worshipping of gods and goddesses. The people who follow it are around the hundreds of thousands range.
- Modern heathenry is based on Norse mythology and developed mainly in Iceland, Germany, and Scandinavia.
- Druidry arose from the Romanticist movement and Celtic tradition. It values the relationship with nature through spiritual practices like meditation and rituals.
- Shamanism centers around the figure of the shaman, the person able to heal the sick, communicate with the otherworld, and accompany souls after their death. In the west, it is practiced mainly in South America and by indigenous peoples.

These are well-founded and practiced religions that are not yet protected or officially recognised by the government, still lacking the faculty of being considered legitimate, even though they have been practiced for centuries, and still are to this day.

International action

The UNHRC values the protection of non-established organized religions by looking out for the conservation of their heritage, as well as the human rights issues that may arise from religious conflicts. Some of the measures that have been taken are the following:

- Claims for protection based on religion or beliefs

The United Nations made a declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples in 2007, which included their right to practice their customs and traditions freely. Furthermore, it states that all doctrines and policies based on origin, race, culture, and religion will be considered racist, legally invalid and morally condemnable.

Analysis

As it was previously stated, non-established organized religions experience a significant amount of discrimination and systemic racism. Indigenous religions and paganism have earned a reputation in the Western World for being a threat, this is because their religious ceremonies differ from ours greatly. Moreover, this causes a substantial issue due to the fact that people are considered dangerous for the religion they practice, often treated differently because of it. Over 23% of the people in the world are not affiliated with an Abrahamic religion, which means that all those people are the ones that we need to protect from discrimination and marginalization. (Mussalo, K, n.d.).

Possible Solutions

1. Create legal protections by the government in order to enact laws that protect individuals that practice non-organized religions. The government will create laws, with the help of the general assembly, that will state defense for those religions that don't have a certain name or identity.
2. With the help of UNICEF, educating children by raising awareness about the existence of non-organized religions in order to prevent discrimination and prejudice can be a great way to fade out systemic racism.
3. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), will help create interreligious coalitions so they can join forces with other faiths to promote their shared values. This could increase the respect and understanding between various religious communities.

Conclusion

Religion is something that has been present since the first civilizations, in whichever way, shape or form. A problem in which people's religion is not being respected, should be dealt with accordingly, which is why the United Nations Human Rights Council believes that the discussion of this topic is pertinent for the millions of people whose freedom of religion is being violated.

As a committee, our main goal is to find solutions and ways to protect the freedom of religion of people who belong to non-established organized religions.

Topic B: Addressing possible Human Rights violations in the Chinese province of Xinjiang

Xinjiang is an autonomous region in the northwest of China, and it is where many ethnic minority groups reside, including the Turkic Uyghur people. Since 2014, the Chinese government has been implementing a new policy which has led to more than one million Muslims, the majority of them Uyghurs, being held in detention camps where their freedom and privacy has been stripped from them as well as forced labor, forced medication and sexual abuse. (Davidson, H, 2022).

Michelle Bachelet released a Human Rights assessment of Xinjiang on her final day in office as the head of the OHCHR. The report concludes that China “may have committed crimes against humanity” against Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups.. Shohrat Zakir, the head of the regional government in Xinjiang refuted the accusations of the genocide, "(the claims) blatantly trampled on international law and basic norms, grossly interfered in China's internal affairs and seriously hurt the feelings of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang." (Kashgarian, A, 2022).

Historical Context

Xinjiang is an autonomous region in the northwestern corner of China and the country's largest political unit. The area is known for its vast mountain ranges and desert basins and has long been occupied by agriculturalists and pastoralists from the indigenous group called Uyghurs. For a long time, efforts have been made to introduce the territory to the regional economy, simultaneously integrating the Han population. Tensions have risen between the two ethnic groups as a result.

Even though Xinjiang's largest ethnic populations are the Uyghurs and the Han, its geographical location causes it to also be inhabited by other ethnic communities like the Hui (Chinese Muslims), Mongolians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, to name a few.

The largest Muslim groups are the Uyghurs and Hui, followed by Kazakhs and Tajiks who also follow Islam. Mongolians, on the other hand, follow Buddhism.

In the past few years there have been several allegations made against the Chinese government calling out the systemic oppression of ethnic minorities, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet. These violations have been done “under the guise of “anti-separatism”, “anti-extremism” and “counterterrorism”. Access to both regions was highly restricted, making human rights documentation and reporting virtually impossible. Pervasive surveillance prevented those living there from sharing information about human rights violations.” (Amnesty International, n.d.). The government implemented restrictive policies that threatened Uyghurs, Kazakhs and predominantly Muslim groups’ freedom and basic human rights.

During the visit, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights at the time (May 2022) was not allowed to see detainees or their families and were rigorously accompanied at all times by state officials. The sought-after report documented arbitrary detentions and discriminatory practices against Chinese Muslims, as well as allegations of sexual and gender-based violence, torture, ill-treatment, forced labours and disappearances, which are considered crimes against humanity. “The government continued a campaign of political indoctrination, arbitrary mass detention, torture and forced cultural assimilation against Muslims living in Xinjiang. Thousands of Uyghur children were separated from their parents.” (Parliament UK, 2022)

The report was not well received by the Chinese government, firmly opposing what had been released in a lengthy and detailed statement which basically argues that “the accusation that its policy is ‘based on discrimination’ is groundless.” and that “its counter-terrorism and “de-radicalization efforts” in the region, had been conducted according to “the rule of law” and by no means add up to suppression of ethnic minorities.” (United Nations, 2022)

International Action

The UN released the report and was met with support from several Western countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands, Lithuania, and France, condemning China’s actions against Muslims as genocide. Belgium and the Czech Republic declared them crimes against humanity. These nations presented a tentative resolution requesting a discussion in the Human Rights Council about the speculation of violation in the region of Xinjiang. This resolution fell short by two votes.

50 countries including but not limited to Japan, Australia, Israel, Turkey, Guatemala, and Somalia, in addition to the ones mentioned previously, signed a statement from a debate condemning the severe human rights violations in Xinjiang region.

Analysis

China has been accused of violating human rights in Xinjiang since 2014, especially against the Turkik Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. The Chinese government has also implemented a system in which they have created detention camps for muslims, due to racial and ethnic profiling in the 2019 pandemic of COVID-19. The situation in Xinjiang has been described as a cultural genocide, as the government seeks to erase the region's unique identity and impose Chinese culture and values. It is the largest genocide known to man since the Holocaust, which is why Human rights groups and the international community have called

on China to end its repression in Xinjiang. However, the government has denied the accusations and defended its policies as necessary to maintain stability and combat terrorism.

Possible solutions

1. Pressure the Chinese government with the help of the sixth committee of the General Assembly by imposing economic sanctions, restricting trade and diplomatic efforts in order to hold China accountable for its actions.
2. Diplomatic and international cooperation with the help of the third committee of the General Assembly can be made by the most powerful countries by meetings with the Chinese officials and making negotiations, in order to seek a peaceful resolution.
3. Support the Urghur people by providing humanitarian aid, human rights groups and advocate for their rights with the help of the Human Rights Watch.

Conclusion

The human rights violations happening in the Chinese province of Xinjiang are of utmost importance, and it is a topic that should be discussed more in order to provide a solution to the problem. People's religion is not being respected, and it should be dealt with accordingly. The United Nations Human Rights Council believes that the dissemination of this topic should be deepened in order to raise awareness. As a committee, our main goal is to find solutions and ways to protect religious, cultural, and linguistic identity and expression. (Kashgarian, A, 2022).

Closing Statement:

Both of these topics carry a gross importance in today's society and they need to be addressed. It is the goal of the United Nations Human Rights Council to solve either of these matters while looking out for each country's best interest. Each delegation will prove useful during both of these issues.

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